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Reading, libraries and well-being

Reading is not only fun and invigorating, it also has many other positive effects on a person's quality of life and well-being. One of the fundamental missions of public libraries has always been to support people's reading habits and promote literature. A number of surveys pertaining to the use of the library have also indicated that libraries are still a significant part of people's lives in precisely this way.

According to international studies, libraries have a positive impact on patrons' reading skills, learning, well-being and national identity, a fact stated by Anna Idström who has studied the beneficial effects of libraries. She has written about her findings in a book concerning the impact of libraries, which was published in 2016 by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. Since the establishment of libraries, their mission has been to support education and reading, and that has been the primary reason for using them. Libraries for the common people began to open in the Scandinavian countries as well, at first in association with grammar schools to increase the level of education of the people.

However, their necessity as a source of well-being and recreation, in general, quickly became evident. Although there is much discussion about the decrease in the popularity of reading, still today, people visit libraries a lot mainly to borrow books and maintain the hobby of reading.

Improve the quality of life

Although libraries nowadays endeavor to diversify their activities and in this way pursue non-patrons, established library patrons are still readers. They also feel that libraries and collections significantly improve their quality of life. This is evident in a patron questionnaire carried out by the National Library of Finland in 2013, whereby the use of library services, patron satisfaction and the significance of the library to the patrons was surveyed.

A total of 16,137 patrons responded to the section of the questionnaire pertaining to public libraries. According to the results, 90 percent of the patrons felt that the library has, above all, supported them in their reading and cultural hobbies and in this way has also improved their quality of life. Respondents clearly did not value the library's other services as much as this.

Additionally, the Cross-European survey to measure users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, carried out in the European Union region in 2013, found that 94 percent of the respondents chose "books to read/borrow" as the most significant service that libraries offer.

Similar studies related to library use carried out in the 2010s in Sweden and England concluded with the same results. The significance of libraries in supporting reading and the hobby of reading still seems to be the most important service that libraries offer.

The benefits of reading

Reading is not only fun and invigorating; it also improves the quality of life. Anna Idström not only brings attention to libraries in general, but also to the literature they offer as a well-being service. She refers to the results of Dugdale and Clark's study, *Literacy Changes Lives: An advocacy resource* (2008), whereby reading has positive effects on people's economic wellbeing, health, family life and civil awareness.

Reading also increases general knowledge and verbal skills, understanding of other cultures and knowledge of human nature. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, studies in Finland related to library use and reading found that the hobby of reading and library use correlated with general well-being, health and, for example, education.

Literature meets the reader

No matter where you go in the world, the library is the only place where anyone can encounter literature. When talking about the library, we should first and foremost talk about the library's unique quality.

At the library, people can also encounter other readers or authors. This can happen directly, for example when borrowing a book, participating in reading circles or meeting an author during a literary event. It can also happen indirectly through professionally constructed systems, which are a part of the library's institutional character.

Library professionals categorize and create descriptors for literature, present literature at exhibitions and on websites, write summaries and literary critiques, write online author profiles, et cetera. The public library should therefore be seen broadly as a part of both national and local literary life. The library not only supports the hobby of reading, but it participates in the promotion of literary knowledge and reading in many different ways.

Reading as a well-being service

When talking about the library and the promotion of reading, the question is usually addressed from the viewpoint of children and youth and mainly as development of cooperation between schools and libraries. There is seldom discussion of adults as readers and reading as a hobby and what the library's interests are in this area of promoting literature.

However, libraries do a lot of work in promoting literature, which can be integrated in the promotion of the well-being of the people. Such activities include the libraries' home-delivery services, reading circles or different projects where library services are offered in homes for the elderly and, one of the newest activities, a reading consultation service where patrons receive a personal, customized reading packet.

These services offer patrons enjoyment and significant emotional well-being. However, professional expertise is needed to produce these services, which doesn't happen by itself or merely because a library professional happens to be interested in literature. Education in the library field should acknowledge the central role of libraries as a distributor and up-keeper of literary culture – from the perspective of the people's well-being as well.

Stick to the basics

Today, different cultural services are seen as services that significantly increase general well-being and even health. The public library is first and foremost a cultural institution, which, like other public cultural institutions, produces cultural services for the people. From the perspective of the library patron, the most essential cultural service, at least in the light of the statistics, seems to be related to the promotion of reading and the hobby of reading.

When talking about the significance of the library with regard to the well-being of the people, you do not necessarily have to expand the library services into new areas; rather, you can stick to the basics and consider how to develop perhaps new services to promote literature and reading, which, in turn, promote the well-being and health of individual people.

It is not enough to state self-evidently in library policies that libraries offer literature. It is more a question of for what and how literature should and could be used in a new way for the better of the patrons. If the library patrons feel – and the studies prove – that reading promotes well-being, it is more a question of what the library's responsibility is as the only institution that offers free literature in this sector of wellbeing.

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